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Angelica Quintana  
*Binghamton University--SUNY*

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# Increasing volunteer engagement in the OIP's Study Abroad Ambassador Program

Angelica Quintana, MPA, & Dr. Thomas Sinclair

## Introduction

The Study Abroad Ambassador Program is one of the most recent initiatives from the Office of International Programs (OIP) that offers returning students a space to complete their intercultural learning by becoming a peer advisor and assisting the study abroad office in the recruitment of prospective students.

The Ambassador Program, opens a direct dialogue among students who share similar study abroad experiences. Ambassadors work to encourage their peers on campus to participate in study abroad programs. Currently, the program accepts 15 participants for each academic school year. While the program is a form of participation for students post study abroad it was noted throughout the year that ambassadors were unable to fulfill their responsibilities due to a range of reasons. This research identifies the factors that effect the ambassadors' varying engagement levels and recommendations for improvement.

## Research Question

What feasible strategies can the OIP implement to improve volunteer engagement in the Study Abroad Ambassador Program?

## Volunteerism & Engagement

### Self Determination Theory

- Human beings have basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Gagné 2003, Pynes, 2009, Millette & Gagné, 2008)

### Intrinsic Motivation

- Engaging in activity for its own sake that includes accomplishment, satisfaction, passions for the mission, etc. (Millette & Gagné, 2008).

### Extrinsic Motivation

- Engaging in an activity for instrumental reasons such as incentives, benefits, or recognition (Millette & Gagné, 2008)

## Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through an online survey and focus groups. The sample size included former and current study abroad ambassadors from the 2015-2016 academic year. The online survey included a total of 29 questions. Three focus groups were conducted with a total of 12 participants

Data was collected based on:

- The ambassadors' overall satisfaction with the program
- Their motivation to participate in the program
- Whether they felt adequately trained to be ambassadors
- Their relationship with staff and other participants
- Participants perceived barriers for further engagement

## Focus Group Findings

1. Ambassadors felt that they were not fully prepared to be an ambassador following their orientation session
  - 8 out of 12 reported that they were unable to answer specific questions during advising hours
2. Ambassadors were uncertain of the program's expectations/requirements
  - 6 out of 12 ambassadors thought that the program involved only advising and sharing of experience
3. Ambassadors sought closer communication/relationships with OIP staff
  - 6 out of 12 ambassadors do not know all OIP staff
4. Ambassadors agree that interactive activities and a balance of group and individual work would motivate their engagement with the program
  - Ambassadors agree that tasks/duties should be more interactive
  - General consensus that ambassadors' work would be more effective if they worked in groups
5. Ambassadors reported general satisfaction with the overall program
  - The ambassadors agree that they like the overall program but also state that there is room for improvements

## Survey Results

The following results are associated with findings 1 & 4

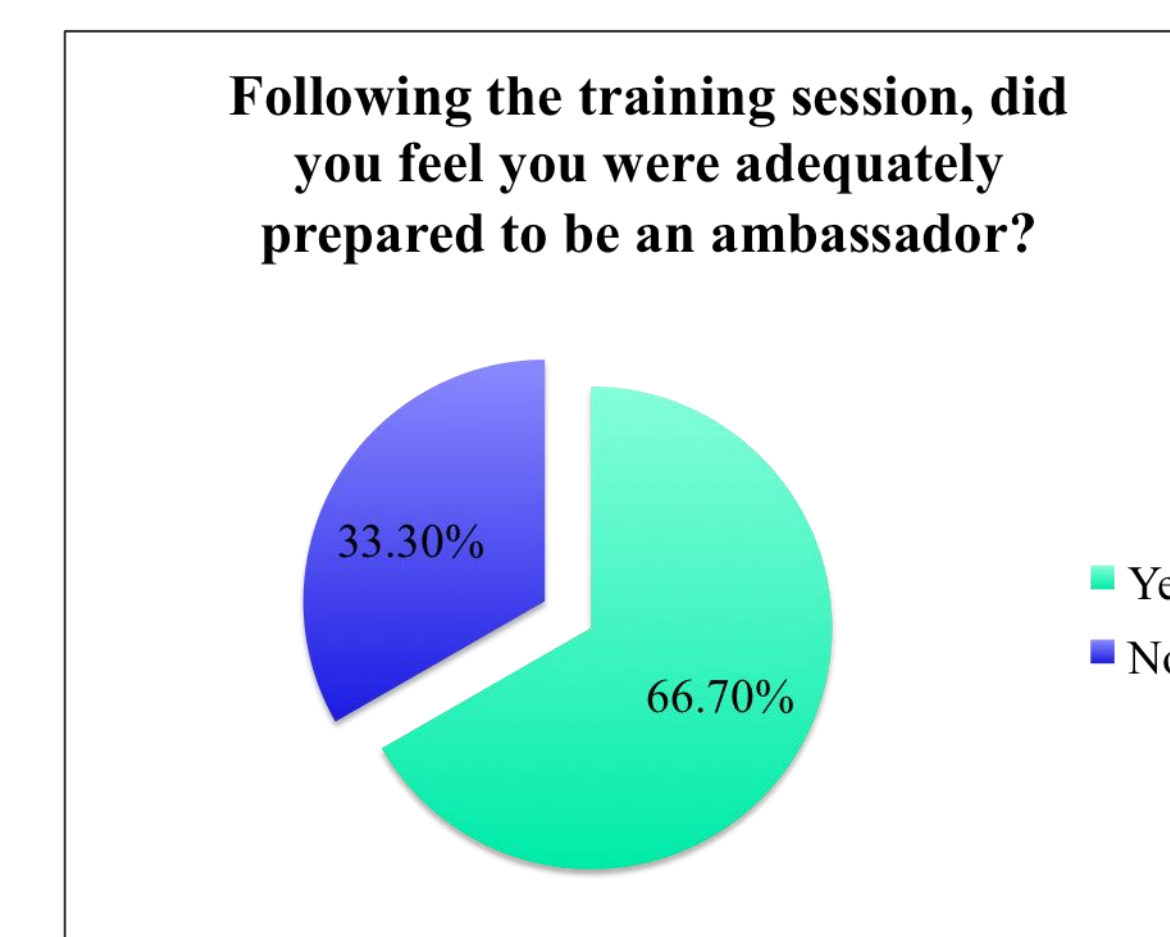


Figure 1: 8 out of the 12 ambassadors agree that they felt prepared to advise after their orientation session.

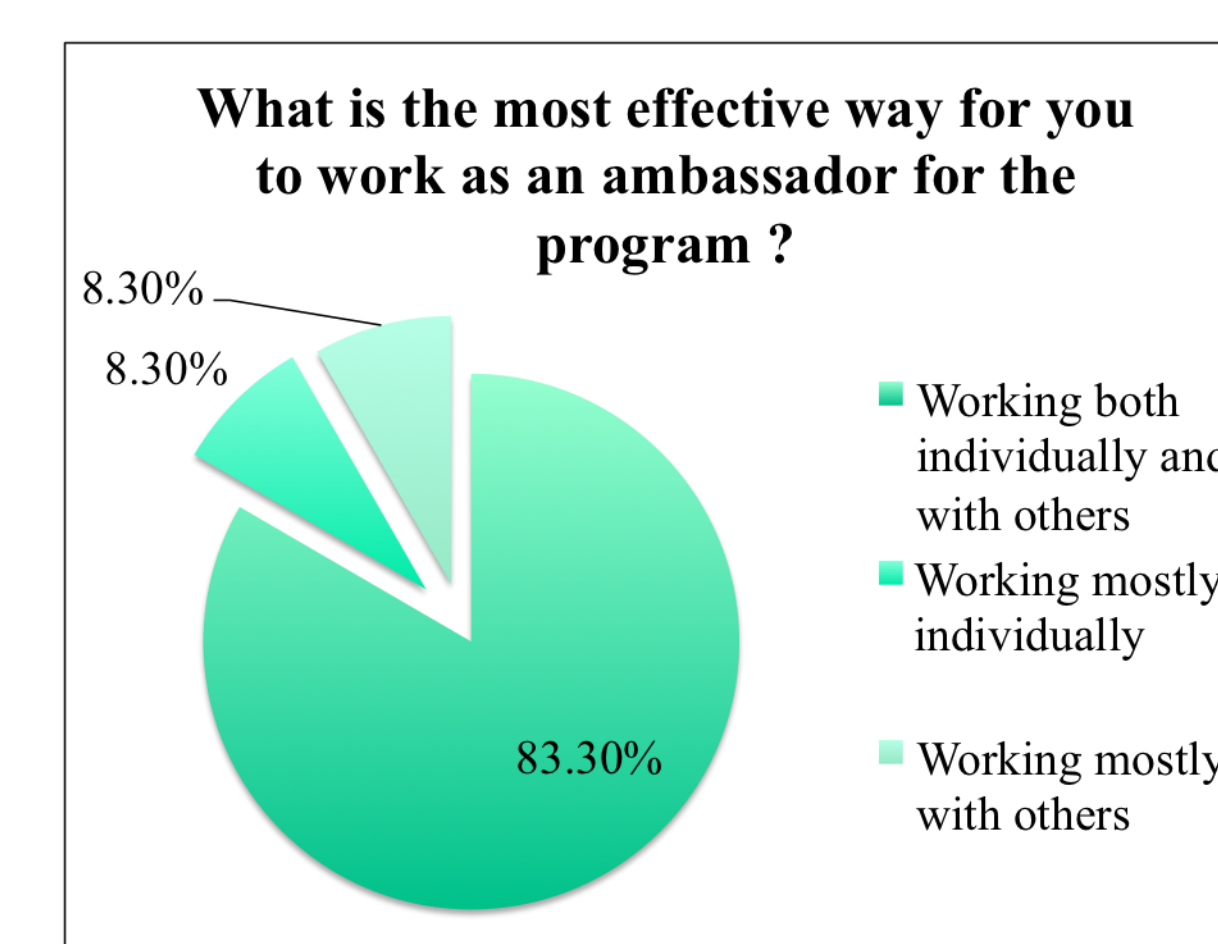


Figure 2: 10 out of the 12 ambassadors would prefer a balance between individual and group work compared to the current individual work system

## Limitations

The Ambassador Program runs from the start to the end of the academic school year (August-May) thus data is subject to change. Focus groups took place between March 18-March 23, 2016. Since this report was written, improvements or adjustments to the program may have been implemented due to constant feedback from ambassadors and OIP staff. While interviews were conducted in March, opinions are subject to change as the program continues.

Another limitation is the varying responses from the survey and the focus groups. Survey responses were inconsistent with interviews. It could be assumed that the focus groups allowed for substantial feedback and an open dialogue as opposed to a survey which is more generalizable

## Recommendations

The following are recommendations the OIP can implement to better engage ambassadors:

1. Develop further training after initial orientation
2. Inform and outline clear expectations of the program to potential ambassadors
3. Build upon OIP staff and ambassador relationships
4. Restructure incentives for further ambassador participation
5. Maintain the enjoyable aspects of the Ambassador Program



Ambassadors table to advertise study abroad opportunities.

## Conclusion

The Study Abroad Ambassador Program has potential to grow. Engagement and satisfaction are main components for its success, therefore it is vital to address them early in the academic year to avoid miscommunication and early disengagement. Vecina (2011) explains that volunteer permanence should be an organization's ultimate objective because it indicates that volunteers enjoy the experience, that recipients receive sustained help, and that organizations manage the process effectively.

## References

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